

[NET HUNTERS]

[P 222-C]

Far less important than disease or accidental death is animal hostility—elephants, buffalo, and leopards being the major sources of danger. It is extremely rare for any Pygmy to be killed by one of these animals. The net-hunting Mbuti have effective medicines against poisonous snakes. (278)

For most illnesses, says Putnam, the Pygmy can find a local remedy. For stomach upsets and diarrhea an enema (a hollow reed with a gourd gummed to one end) is administered, with the use of vegetable decoctions containing *gorogoro* bark for the former complaint, and *teboo* liana for the latter. These enemas are also used to produce abortions. For ailments that they are unable to cure and that are foreign to them, some may seek the help of a villager witch doctor, though Mbuti opinion varies as to their efficiency. (847) [755] [177]

Death, then, is accepted as just as natural a phenomenon as birth, and the body is accorded little ritual respect. There are, unlike Schebesta's account for the archers, cited examples of wailing. The following instances taken from the notes of Anne Putnam illustrate its extent. 763 • (761)

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1. A Pygmy who had been visiting another band returned to his own camp and reported that a cousin of his had died. A wailing, suddenly started, was taken up, mostly by women but also by men and children, all over the camp. It lasted for 10 minutes and was repeated several times during the evening for five minutes at a time. Everyone went to sleep as usual; there was a final wail on waking the next morning. 763 •

2. A newborn infant (son of one of the most important hunters in the band) died at night. Only its father and mother wailed. Early in the morning the parents dug a pit in the house and buried the baby, wrapped in a small mat, with no ceremony. The next morning the couple dismantled the house and, using the same material, rebuilt it on the other side of the clearing. That night the father danced as usual. 763 764

3. An old Mbuti woman died while visiting the village. She was the mother of three of the male members of the band. Most of her relatives were with her when she died, and they wailed. When the news was received back in the hunting camp, such of her relatives as remained there wailed. Only one of them, one of the great hunters of the band, left to attend the burial. 763

4. There was an epidemic in a hunting camp. [P-222-D] 763 731 165

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[CP. 223-A]

- 763 and two people died. After burial and wailing,
731 camp was broken. On the march to another site a
165 woman who had not contracted the illness died,
although she was not "ready to die." Within
two weeks a woman gored by a buffalo (an
extremely rare occurrence) died from her
wounds. Following this last event, there was a
consultation, and it was suggested that the
band should disperse as there was some strong
influence at work.¹ However, the dispersal did
not take place.

763 5. A very well-liked hunter died while in the
[754] village. There was some talk that a half-para-
lyzed Pygmy, also a member of the band, had
put a curse on him; but this in no way impaired
the friendship between the accused and the
children of the deceased. When the Pygmy was
dying, his son wanted to take him back to the
forest but was persuaded to let him die in the
village in peace. His family and friends were
present; those in the hut wailed occasionally,
those outside were busy cooking. When he died
the wailing broke out anew, and relatives
started coming into the village from the forest.
His villager patron could not come, so he sent
his brother, the headman of a village, a few

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the official wailing, as well as before or after it. 152

Anne Putnam (1954, 77) mentions the opinion of a Pygmy hunter concerning the village custom of burying the dead in a cemetery. He is reported as saying, "There the ground locks everyone's arms together and it isn't comfortable." 764
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She also refers (1954, 81) to village speech-making following a burial, during which the cause of the death is hinted at. On one occasion, the death of a young Pygmy girl in the village, the villagers attributed the calamity to the evil-eye and roused a relative of the girl to vow vengeance. The next morning, however, the Pygmies all went hunting, despite the assurance of the villagers that it was dangerous to go hunting for three days after any death and that no game would fall into their nets. Four antelope were caught. 763 -
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584 small it will wish a boy to stay or a girl to bring her husband to live
591 with her. If the band is large, however, it will prefer to lose a member.
621 If the marriage is within the band, and the band is large, the couple
may still go to join another band, the choice of which being deter-
mined by size again, more than by any other consideration. The
presence of friends or relatives and knowledge of the territory are im-
portant but secondary considerations. This question of residence falls
primarily upon the hunters to decide; the elders have little to say.

DEATH

761 In death, the final crisis of the life cycle, we again see a lack of em-
602 phasis on kinship, though once more perhaps we should bear in mind
[77] that the contact between the Mbuti and the villagers has undoubt-
edly affected not only kinship and ritual terminology, but also kinship
relations and ritual practice. Be that as it may, in the present context,
death is of immediate concern to both the nuclear family and the
whole band. For the nuclear family, and for other members of the
family who have during their lives been close to the deceased person,
761 it is an occasion for grief. This grief is freely expressed by young and
152 old together, and may at times become apparently uncontrollable.
In the same way that the Mbuti are given to excessive bursts of laugh-
ter, often developing into near hysteria, so when they weep they do so
with what amounts almost to violence. Children of the deceased,
without regard to age or sex, begin weeping the moment they hear
the news of death, or as soon as a sick person indicates that he is not
going to live much longer. If news of sickness or death reaches a rela-
tive some distance away, the relative will shout and yell rather than
weep, and will continue this way until he reaches the camp where the
sick person is lying. Immediately on entering the camp he will burst
into tears, and wailing loudly will enter the hut and throw himself on
the ground at the bedside of the dying person. Sometimes a close re-
lative will injure himself with self-inflicted knife wounds, or by tying
a halter around his neck and trying to strangle himself. Others pay
little attention to these demonstrations of grief and I have never seen
any serious injury result. Elders look on, however, with some dis-
approval, and will intervene if there is any danger of such injury.

[889] The rest of the adults in the band will sit around outside their huts,
763 watching the wailers run in and out of the sick person's hut, and while
152 they themselves are likely to be serious and upset they are also likely

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to make jokes at any excess of zeal on the part of any mourner. Young children continue playing as though nothing were going on; youths sit morosely by themselves, or wander off into the forest on foraging expeditions.

The moment death occurs there is a renewed burst of wailing, then the camp begins to quiet down. In the forest the practice is to scratch a shallow hole in the floor of the hut and bury the deceased person there, pulling the hut down over the grave. The camp is then abandoned, nothing being left to indicate the grave site, nothing being buried with the body except maybe a few very personal belongings such as bark cloth, bracelet or necklace. All other property is divided before the camp is abandoned. If death takes place in a village, then the Mbuti leave the funeral arrangements in the hands of the villagers.

If death occurs suddenly, the same procedure applies except that the period of wailing is shorter. In either case burial takes place the same day, if enough daylight is left, or as early as possible the following day. During burial, either in the village or in the forest, there is likely to be a final outburst of wailing from the relatives, particularly female, and some may try to throw themselves into the grave. In the village the eldest son is the chief mourner, and is supported by either a friend or another relative, younger or older.

In the village the entire band takes part in the burial procession, and those who dig the grave, under villager supervision, are youths and not necessarily connected in any way with the deceased, other than by band membership. They laugh and joke, sometimes even when the body is being lowered into the grave. Mbuti elders only take exception to this if they see that it is annoying the villagers. On the other hand if the formal wailing becomes too loud and enthusiastic, as the villagers like it to be, the elders object strongly. Particularly do they object to excessive demonstrations of grief from anyone who is not a close relative. Their main objective, it seems, is to restore "quiet" to the camp as soon as possible. The moment burial is over only the genuine sobbing of the immediate family is permitted in the forest, and this may be heard coming from their huts at any time of the day or night, never in public. In the village, however, there is still an obligatory mourning period, and about three times each day, for about two or three days, sporadic formal wailing breaks out in the village camp.

If a child dies the grief is less widespread, and in the case of a very small child the camp may not even be abandoned; only one hut will be pulled down and deserted. The child may even be buried within

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342 closed on hinges. The only other hut to have a door was that of
[184] Njobo, which was at the opposite end and also faced down the mid-
dle, but not quite so blatantly as Ekianga's. The rest had leaf-
covered frames which were simply pulled across the opening to close
it.

342 My house was built opposite Njobo's, with the old witch Sau
123 and her son Amabosu to my right. At first the Pygmies were going
122 to build me the biggest house ever built in the forest—bigger than
Camp Putnam. We finally compromised and when the framework
of interlaced saplings was finished I had two rooms, each about ten
[476] feet square. Even so, I knew it would never be finished, for by then
the number of workers was dropping off rapidly; so I suggested
mudding the walls of only one room, but leafing the whole roof
so that our "village" would have a veranda. This was thought to be
a fine idea.

761 One day I was on my way out to the plantation with Kenge,
• 763 Manyalibo and Moke, when on the way we met Cephu's handsome
nephew, Kelemoke, a very light-skinned youth who had two chil-
dren even lighter than he. He was wailing and crying, and told us
that Cephu's daughter, only a few years old, had just died. He then
761 continued on his way, wailing loudly. I expected the others to turn
763 back, but they continued as though nothing had happened. Kenge
152 made some remark about Cephu's virility and the others snorted with
522 laughter. Kenge had the charming habit of laughing at his own
jokes, which seemed funnier to him the more he thought about them,
so he was still clapping his side and doubling up and shouting to the
forest what a funny joke it was when we reached the plantation.
763 Then he stopped. Although we could see nobody, Moke called out
761 quietly that Cephu's daughter had died, and Njobo and Masisi and
152 a few others appeared from where they had been "working," looking
rather cross at being disturbed. Njobo said it was a nuisance. The
[765] girl was his wife's niece, and this meant that his wife would keep

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him awake with her wailing and would probably forget to cook for him. He set off at once for the village, grumbling, and Moke went with him. Masisi started one of his loud tirades, saying in his sharp voice that Cephu never looked after his children properly, so it was no wonder they died. This must have reminded Kenge of his joke, because he started laughing again, or perhaps he was laughing at Masisi, but Masisi got angrier than ever and said he was going straight to the village to tell Cephu what he thought of him. He stamped angrily after Njobo and Moke, still shouting deprecating remarks about the bereaved father. [763
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Kenge laughed happily and said that there was going to be a dreadful noise when Masisi got back to the village, so we would do better to stay where we were until it was all over. Manyalibo, who had not said a word, suggested looking for *itaba*, a sweet edible root, and with food our foremost thought we set off. [222]

When we got back to the village in the late afternoon we found everyone sitting around outside their little houses, staring gloomily at nothing in particular. Masisi was still talking loudly, pointing at the sky and over in the direction of Cephu's camp, from which I could hear women wailing, and saying that it was a shame that Cephu should let his children die and cause everyone so much trouble. Tungana mournfully said that he didn't like funerals; the Negroes made so much noise at them. Masisi's younger brother, Mambunia, still a bachelor because one of his legs was crippled with paralysis and he was not able to hunt well enough to support a family, added in shrill falsetto that Cephu was so inconsiderate and such a trouble-maker that he would probably let his daughter die completely—completely and absolutely. [764
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I did not understand what he meant at first, but it provoked an immediate response from Asofalinda, Ekianga's widowed sister. She strode across the camp, marching with long swinging strides to where Mambunia was sitting, his paralyzed leg stuck out in front [763
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761 of him. She pointed her skinny hand at him, flinging her arm back-
152 ward and forward with every step, rhythmically enumerating all the
578 reasons why he should keep his mouth shut. He was a great one at
complaining about other people being trouble-makers, but he made
more noise than anyone. Besides, one should never say that anyone
had died completely unless they had died for ever.

Madyadya, Manyalibo's adopted son, lazily wandered in between
them and spitting on the ground said that Asofalinda made a pretty
good noise herself. Old Moke laughed noiselessly. Asofalinda strode
back to her house and slammed the fine wooden door; Mambunia
continued to grumble to himself for a few minutes, and Masisi asked
who was going to give him some tobacco.

761 It seemed that the girl was very ill with dysentery but was not
763 yet dead. The Pygmies express various degrees of illness by saying
953 that someone is hot, with fever, ill, dead, completely or absolutely
dead, and, finally, dead for ever.

763 Unhappily, early the next morning loud wailing from Cephu's
152 camp, a quarter of a mile away, told us that the little girl was now
dead for ever. When someone is ill the women relatives will wail,
but it is a formal act, perhaps copied from the Negroes for whom it
is an obligation. But when someone really dies, for ever, there is
among the Pygmies a burst of uncontrollable grief, not only from
relatives, but from friends. Even men will weep if they have been
close to the dead person. It is a very different sound, and a terrible
one, and that is what we heard shortly after dawn.

764 The funeral took place the same day, directed by the Negroes.
[123] I helped with the digging of the grave, but Kenge, Kelemoke,
Amabosu, and Masisi's eldest son Ageronga were the chief diggers.
[177] The Negroes lent the tools and stood there, giving instructions, and
they became impatient and angry when we stopped and climbed out
of the grave for a smoke. The young Pygmies laughed and joked, and

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voice of the clan totem, and it makes only animal sounds—it does not sing.

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To end the period of mourning there had to be a feast, a great deal of the food being supplied by the Bantu. I felt that this was really why the Pygmies went through with the Negro funeral ceremony. Everyone was in high spirits. Even Cephu and his group joined the festivities, glad that there was no longer any need for the women to wail, constantly reminding them of a death they would rather forget. It is better to forget the dead quickly, the Pygmies said, instead of making yourself remember them all the time, as the villagers do. When referring to the Bantu in this way, disparaging them or their customs, they used one of two terms, one meaning "animal," the other "savage"; the Negroes used the same terms about the Pygmies, and there was no great feeling of mutual respect.

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At the height of the festivity there was a sudden cry from the roadside, swelling into a burst of wailing that was infinitely more terrible than anything I had heard before. It was certainly worse than when Cephu's poor little girl had died for ever. Then old Balekimito, the much-loved mother of Ekianga and his dead brother Kolongo and of starchy old Asofalinda, was carried into the camp. She had been ill for some time, but as she was an old woman nobody had thought much of it. She had been ill before and not died completely, not even just died. But now she had died completely and absolutely, and her great hulking son, the great hunter, the man of substance with three wives, hairy, ugly Ekianga, was running up and down, his face streaked with tears, beating himself on the head with his fists and crying that his mother was going to die for ever.

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Balekimito was carried gently over to her son's house, through the wooden door, and laid on the floor just inside. I went in to see her. The poor old woman was so thin I could see every bone in her weak, tired body; yet when I had last seen her she had been fine, upright, strong, and a powerful old matriarch if ever there was one.

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- 763 She looked up at me with eyes that already had a bluish film over them and caught hold of my hand. She said she wanted to die near her son and was glad to be back again. She agreed to take some white
[159] man's medicine, and the dispenser from the Station de Chasse was
[177] sent for. This was quite a departure, as this family had always resisted more strongly than any the use of modern medicine.

Ekianga was almost beside himself. Gray-haired Asofalinda, no longer stiff and rough, but full of kindness, tried to comfort her younger brother, but she was too full of grief herself. She knelt on the ground beside her mother and wept. The old lady was the only one who seemed fully in control of herself, though the room was filled with wailing men, women and children. When the dispenser came she flickered to life with a burst of her old flame and slapped feebly at him with a bony hand as he pulled gently at her bark cloth to give her an injection, telling him to mind what he was doing. I felt her wince as the needle went in, but she continued looking up and smiling her old sweet smile. She was among her relatives and her friends, and that was all she wanted; she knew the injection would do no good. She held onto me so tightly that I couldn't leave until she finally dozed off; then when her grasp relaxed I quietly left and went out into the sunlight. Everyone was sitting around morosely, almost angrily. Even the little children, whom I had seen playing contentedly through other funerals, were quiet, holding onto their mothers in a frightened way. Everyone was watching Ekianga's fine wooden door, waiting for the end, waiting for old Balekimito to die for ever.

It was only a matter of hours. She never woke up.

The demonstration of grief that followed was no mere formal expression ordained by custom; it was something very real and disturbing. I have seen death in a Negro village where the atmosphere was one of fear—fear of sorcery, of the power of evil that had been unleashed. Here it was quite different. It was not a feeling of

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fear, but a recognition of the completeness of a loss that could never 763 •
be made good. There was a finality and terrible emptiness in old
Balekimito's death which could not be answered, for which there
was no explanation, not even through sorcery or witchcraft. For the
moment it seemed that the Pygmies, faced with the death of an old
and well-loved and respected person such as this old lady, had nothing
to cling to, and I was genuinely afraid that some of them would
come to harm. Young and old alike crowded around the house, trying
to force their way to Balekimito's deathbed. They were even fighting
to get in, and once inside they fought to get out. At one point several
children came flying out in a frenzy and threw themselves onto the
ground, beating it with their arms and legs, kicking and biting at
anyone who tried to comfort them. Inside, the commotion was even [762]
worse—Asofalinda, looking almost as old as her dead mother, had
put a noose around her neck and seemed to be trying to strangle
herself, full of remorse at having let her mother die. It took three
men to take the noose from her neck, and when they finally tore it
from her she ran outside and collapsed on the ground, sobbing her
heart out.

Even Moke quietly forced his way into the death room and
stayed there for a few minutes, saying nothing, making no sound,
while tears rolled down his wrinkled face. Then he went out again
and helped Asofalinda into the shade. Only Tungana and his wife,
Bonyo, remained where they were, outside their hut a few yards
away. They were too old for the exertion, and they just sat and
cried to themselves, unashamed.

I went to my half-finished veranda to get out of the sun and
found Kenge and a number of youths sitting around a fire. No
matter how hot it is, there always has to be a fire. After a while the [372]
rest of the men joined us and sat silently, as though waiting. 763
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Moke came into the middle of the veranda and started talking, very
softly and quietly, so that it was difficult to hear him at all. The

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- 763 atmosphere was so tense I wondered if there was at last going to be
761 a real accusation of witchcraft, though from what I had seen the
Pygmies had no great belief in such things. But Moke's first words
put me at ease. Choking back a little sob, he managed to say in a
matter-of-fact way, "She died well."

There was a general nodding of heads. Manyalibo, who was a
nephew of Balekimito's, said in his gruff way that everyone should
be happy that she had lived so long, happy that she had died so well,
and that all this wailing should stop at once. He added that the
death was a "big thing," and that it was a "matter for the forest."

- [765] There was a silence, and, looking around to make sure that there
were no women about, Manyalibo announced, "I shall call out my
molimo, and we will feast not for a week but for a month, or two
months, or even three; we shall feast the molimo and make the
forest happy."

- 763 Njobo, the great elephant hunter, had the final say. He stirred
[555] the fire idly with a stick, sending showers of sparks and ashes up
into the warm air. "We have been in the village too long," he said.
[829] "We should have gone back to the forest before; that is where we
[186] belong. Now we must go back, far away from the village and from
[168] the people of the village. It is a bad place."

He said that a few would stay behind to finish the work on my
house, but that the rest of us should gather together all the food we
could and be ready to move within a couple of days. The next day we
would put Balekimito in the ground, and maybe the day after that
we would leave.

- At this everyone cheered up visibly and began criticizing the
women and children who were still pouring in and out of Ekianga's
house, beating themselves and crying. Masisi said crossly that they
[152] would never behave this way if they were in the forest, and as he
[828] talked he raised his voice until he worked himself into a real temper.
He stalked out of the veranda and down to the far end of the little

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village, brandishing one hand above his head, telling everyone to stop making such a dreadful noise, that it was not doing any good to anybody. "Crying is a matter for the immediate family," he said. [52] 763 •
"She was a mother to us all, but for all of us to cry is just too much noise." He clutched his head to illustrate the point, then grabbed a couple of children, one of them his own, and sent them flying. By now his temper was no longer artificial, and the women decided it was wiser to keep out of his way, and left.

As soon as the wailing stopped and the door to Ekianga's house was closed, with only the family inside, the cloud of depression lifted. Everyone started talking about the imminent return to the forest— [166]
about where they would go to hunt, where they would go for mushrooms and for fruit and nuts and honey, and where they should make their first camp. All agreed that it should be far away—but not so far that old Tungana could not come.

That night there was a little wailing from Ekianga's house, and a few women both in the main camp and in Cephu's camp were crying to themselves. Every now and then Masisi's sharp voice was raised, telling them all to go to sleep.

The funeral took place the following morning, again conducted by the Negroes. Balekimito was buried next to Cephu's daughter, and once again, when the grave had been filled in and the women had left, the Negroes tried to conduct a council to discover who had been responsible for the death. But the Pygmies were in no mood to play games. They simply walked off after the women, washed themselves perfunctorily in the Nepussi and returned to the camp to start preparations for going back to the forest. 765
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After all, if Balekimito had died she had died well, and there was a lot to do—plantations to raid and food to steal. This was no time to fool around with Negro notions of witchcraft and sorcery; this was a time to get back to the forest as quickly as possible and to hold the biggest molimo festival the forest had ever seen, to make the forest happy again. [186]

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nobody there. He struggled and wrestled but could not escape, and eventually he was thrown onto the ground. He suffered violent dysentery from that time on. But in spite of this illness, Aberi was still strong and healthy enough to be one of the most energetic, if not one of the most successful hunters. And so when he fell ill during a visit to the village, some time after the elima had ended, nobody thought much about it—except Aberi. He claimed that he had been bewitched, and he knew why. He said that many months ago he and two other Pygmies had promised a villager from the BaNgwana village of Dar es Salaam that they would give him a lot of meat if he let them have a sack of rice. The villager, unwisely, gave them the rice but never got the meat. After several attempts to get his due he cursed all three with a powerful curse, and it was this curse, Aberi said, that was killing him. This villager not only possessed the witchcraft substance, but he knew it and used it deliberately. He was a sorcerer. Nobody believed Aberi, however, and slowly he got better.

One evening I met him wandering up the path leading from Cephu's tiny camp to our own, and I asked him how he was, saying that it was good to see him walking again. He often wore a dismal, dejected look, but this time his face was completely empty of any expression whatsoever. It was frightening to see a face normally full of one emotion or another so void. Even his ugliness had deserted him, and in its place there was just nothing. Aberi said, slowly and carefully, that his body was better but he was going to die because he had been cursed, and for that there was no cure. He spent a short while in our camp, and we all tried to cheer him up. He seemed to brighten after a little singing, and when he left us he was almost cheerful.

Early in the morning, while it was still dark, I was awakened by an outburst of the most terrible wailing and crying, and I knew what it meant without asking the ash-gray Kenge, who came pounding at my door. I went outside, and in the dim light I saw Pygmies all over

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177 the place, standing in the doors of their huts, listening. One after
159 another said, "Aberi is dead, completely dead."
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• 763 Apparently he had gone back to his camp, and Tamasa had given
569 him a little hot broth to warm him up, as he complained of being
754 cold. He had gone to sleep, but later, quite suddenly and without
any warning, he had awakened with a start, struggling violently as
though trying to get up. But some unseen power was clutching at his
shoulder, and Aberi gave a loud cry and fell back dead. Within a
matter of weeks both the other Pygmies who had been cursed with
Aberi had also died, under similar circumstances.

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177 If the Pygmies had believed in witchcraft, such a terrible series
754 of coincidences would certainly have brought forth an accusation. As
C it was they never even mentioned any possibility other than that the
563 villager might have used poison. This could have been true in Aberi's
754 case—but in all three? The Pygmies shook their heads and said
nothing.

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177 Aberi was buried the following afternoon, with villagers officiat-
764 ing. Sansiwake was almost beside himself with grief, and Tamasa
C had to be dragged bodily away from the grave. When the women
563 had all left, the villagers started their usual inquiry into the death, to
761 see who was responsible. They did not mention their fellow villager
764 from Dar es Salaam, the one who had cursed Aberi; instead they
(754) named Tamasa. Kelemoke and Masalito, who had their arms around
Sansiwake and were trying to comfort him, turned and looked at the
accusers. Kelemoke spoke for them both. He said, quietly, but with
considerable feeling, "Tamasa is our sister, Tamasa is our mother.
We do not kill our own kind."

Without waiting for the villagers to finish their formalities, the
Pygmies all returned to their camps and began preparing to leave the
village and go back to the forest, where such things do not happen.